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Celebrating

Celebrate family life? What a switch! Most of the reports of family life today are hardly worthy of celebrating! Divorce statistics, reports of child and wife abuse, trends toward alternative life styles that avoid "family," are all saying that the family in this culture is in real trouble. So why celebrate?

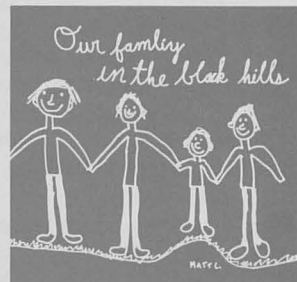
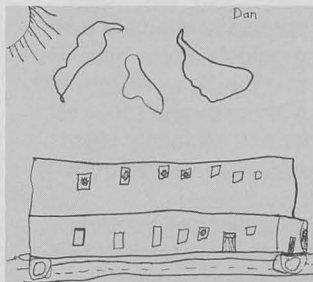
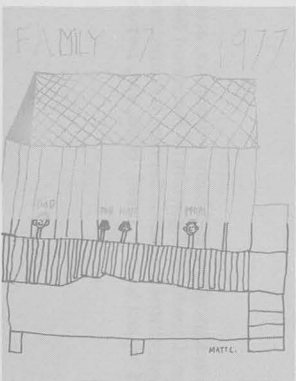
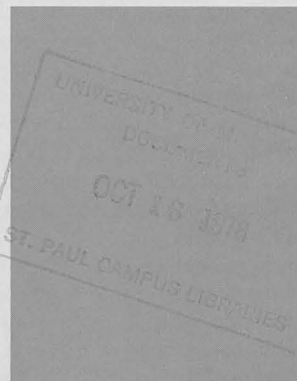
Well yes, the message often presented by the media is a gloomy one. It may be exaggerated and blown out of proportion, and it's too bad some people take on an attitude of hopelessness and apathy because of the message. On the other hand perhaps this message is a good chance to stop and think about exactly what kind of family you live in, what you would like to be, and how you might begin moving in the direction of your hopes for strengthening family life.

A way to begin strengthening family life is to focus on the positive, unique aspects, to be more aware of what your family has going for it and to really appreciate that fact. It's always easier and more meaningful to work on improving **some** things, when we feel proud and good about **other** things. Celebrating the positive can give your family the energy and strength to work on the not so positive. Too often families get so wrapped up in their problems and short-

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Family Life!

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comings they forget or lack energy to celebrate. Like many other things in life, the best way to make celebrating family life happen is to think about it, plan for it and then do it!

STRENGTH—SO WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Family strength can be defined in many ways. In fact, it's probably more accurate to think of a "notion" of family strength than a specific definition. Each of the members of the family has individual uniqueness and personal strengths. A great thing about the family unit is that when all those members are working on being together, the total family strength is much greater than the sum of the parts. It's the idea that separate forces, when joined together, often can accomplish more and experience more than the total of each of them going it alone.

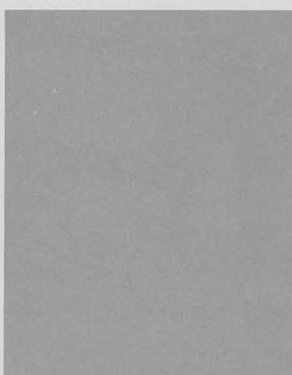
There are many, many examples of skills and qualities that each family has. The uniqueness of the family is often what determines which of these are really strengths. For example, being very saving and thrifty may be seen by one family as their greatest strength, while it's not viewed as a strength by the family next door. Values (about money, education, relationships, work, etc.) play a big part in how families see their strengths and, of course, values differ from person to person and family to family. The important thing is not to have universal agreement on what "strengths" are and to work toward some master list, but to encourage all families to define and identify and celebrate their own strengths.

Some qualities and general patterns can be identified as strengthening to all families, regardless of size, form, system, values. These are the kind of qualities and patterns that do not specify exact behavior or dictate how a family "should live." Rather they are a kind of philosophy that can help a family achieve the kind of life most appropriate for the people who live there. The examples mentioned here are by no means the **only** ones, but they are given as a basis to start thinking about families in a positive way.

IT IS STRENGTHENING FOR FAMILIES TO:

- * Value each member of the family for his/her uniqueness and the contribution each one makes to the family's togetherness; a balance between family and individual is needed.
- * Work toward open patterns of communication that allow for the individuals to express themselves and get feedback, and so the family unit can be enhanced by the interaction of its members.
- * Develop, live by and continually evaluate certain "family rules;" these are guidelines for behavior in a family that makes that family work smoothly. Rules should be made with everyone's interest in mind, and most important, all family members should be fully aware of the rules and why they exist.
- * Understand and cope with change in society; this often means it's important for families to be flexible and accepting of change within the

Suggestions for Family Enrichment



PHOTOS FROM PARENTS' MAGAZINE FILMSTRIP CATALOG, DEPT. C, 52 VANDERBILT AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10017

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- ✱ family unit as well.
Learn to help themselves (with problem-solving, coping with crises, making decisions, etc.) in a growth-producing way; this means working together as a system.

SOME EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES FOR “CELEBRATING FAMILY LIFE”:

I. Strength Bombardment

Why: The intent of celebrating family life is to build the energy and strength of the family in hopes that attention will next be paid to working on the problem areas. All of us are better at working on needed changes when we feel strong, loved, valued, appreciated. Strength bombardment is an exercise that has family members take time to tell others in the family how they are valued, appreciated, respected. It is a time to “accent the positive, ignore the negative.”

How: Depending on your family size, ages, form, you may want to 1) have each person write a “strengths slip” for every other family member. The completed list can be shared by the owner with the whole family. Encourage everyone to add on to the written lists. 2) Without any writing, take turns being the “valued” person. Have that person begin by naming the thing s/he values most about him/herself. Others then contribute to the strength identification. Remember individual values differ and not everyone will see the same strengths in the same people. Respect and allow for everyone’s opinions, but keep the contributions positive!

After individual strength bombardment, the family should identify a number of “family strengths.” These may overlap with some of the individual ones, but some new “joined effort” strengths may emerge. These family strengths should be fairly well agreed upon by the group. Include a family strengths “circle” for this exercise. It might be fun to save it and compare your “circle” of a few years from now with it.

II. The Family Banner:

Why: This is an active, fun, creative exercise that involves the whole family, and brings together people’s ideas, talents, and energy to produce a visible description of how you see your family. The banner is a sign of the wonderful uniqueness of your family. It can be displayed for others to see and ask about, or it can be kept private and enjoyed by those of you who made it.

How: It can be made from anything you like (burlap, felt, old sheets, wood, paper). It can be any size or shape, and the sky’s the limit for the

design. Try to put as much of **YOU** into it as possible — your hobbies, interests, favorite memories, etc. It may center on a theme (a trip, your spiritual life, etc.), or it can be a conglomeration of your family life in general. No special artistic talent is required — just be sure to involve the whole family.

III. Gift-Giving:

Why: Like strength bombardment, gift-giving can be a way to relate your appreciation and care for others. Often, unfortunately, gift-giving is not that, but an action done out of expectation and ritual (remember all those Christmas gifts you only felt **obliged** to give!). This activity can help your family renew the meaning of giving each other gifts.

How: You might select a time of traditional gift-giving for this activity, or perhaps it could be a new, “celebrating family life” tradition. The one big rule is that no money should be spent, and that each gift be thought up by and/or created by the giver especially for the recipient. Gifts can include **objects** (like Sears Roebuck paper dolls, complete with wardrobe and home furnishings), gifts of **time and energy** (three nights of doing the dishes when it’s someone else’s turn), **creative expressions** (poetry, drawings, other art or craftwork), or the giving of **prized possessions** (giving his sister the baseball card she has been admiring every time she enters his room). Remember, gifts should be something not expected or required. Avoid making pledges and promises that are part of just being (like “I’ll finish my homework every night”).

IV. Coming To Your Senses:

Why: To really celebrate life you need to use all five senses. Because we have been conditioned to ignore, or at least subdue our sensualism, it’s easy to go through life unaware of the role our senses play in family living. Our senses have an integral part in feelings, likes, dislikes, images, memories, communication, and many more aspects of life.

How: If your family is willing to spend some time discussing senses, you may want to experiment with some sensory exercises. Use everyday items and examples of tasting, smelling, touching, seeing, hearing, to illustrate how people react differently, the effect of smooth vs. rough, the appeal of some smells vs. others, the images of certain sounds, etc. In this exercise, encourage people to concentrate on one sense at a time and to really try to “soak in” the effect of the sensation.

Now, share examples of sensory impressions of many kinds that form images, memories, joys, emotions, etc. in the minds of your family members. Some examples include:

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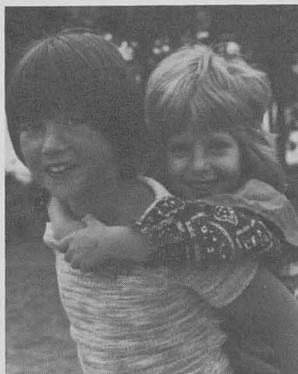


PHOTO BY ROSE REGAN



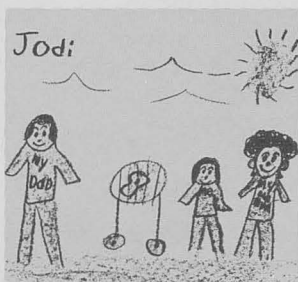
- SMELLS:** of wonderful times of the year:
pine, cloves, fresh grass, burning wood;
of delightful foods: that mean holidays, picnics, company coming;
of caring, helping: Vicks for baby's chest, lotion for grandma's dry skin;
of bodies together: dad's shaving lotion, freshly bathed little bodies, in just laundered pajamas; perspiration from summer softball games;
- TASTES:** of gingerbread and squash that mean supper in the fall;
of kisses: sweet from suckers, wet from swimming, spicy from pizza;
of goofs; soap on a fork, ashes in the hamburgers, salt on the cereal;
- SIGHTS:** of surprise: a new bike, the puppy for Christmas, the news of the baby;
of pride; first day of school, little girl-now-young-woman, honor roll;
of love: hugging, crying, helping, protecting, nursing, XX's on letters;
of accomplishment: a clean kitchen floor, the new wallpaper, ripe tomatoes;
- SOUNDS:** of family work: lawn mowers, washing machines, snow shovels;
of family play: model trains, football crowds, canoe paddles in the water;
of family tradition: music, prayer, grandpa's favorite old saying;
of emotion: crying, shouting, laughing, shrieking, whispering;
- TOUCHES:** of a favorite lumpy, pilling blanket, with worn silky edges;
of skin: wrinkles, goosebumps, mosquito bites, fevers, whiskers;
of curly hair, cold bathroom floors in the morning, furry kittens;
of backrubs, and pats on the head from Aunt Jenny, and chin tickles.

The next collection of "celebrating" suggestions are a number of ideas for family discussion that might be done whenever you are together and there is space for sharing thoughts and feelings. This might be when you drive together sometime, work on a family project that allows room for talking, during mealtime, or even a special time you arranged to be together just to talk. In each of these exercises take care to keep focussing on the positive, and be sure to respect everyone's ideas and expressions. These activities not only allow for the celebration of family life, but they are good practice in communicating and creating a spirit of togetherness — something our rapidly paced world has managed to frequently destroy.

V. Family Fantasy:

Why: Being able to pretend, daydream, fantasize is a wonderfully magic privilege that humans have throughout life. Often words like

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“mature,” “adult,” “controlled” cause us to reject and avoid childlike curiosity, playfulness, imagination and excitement. Fantasy, the world of “I wonder,” “what if,” and “wouldn’t it be ...” is not just a silly waste of time that makes us unproductive adults. In fact, taking time to daydream and pretend can result in a flow of creative energy that gives you options you never knew you had. One of the most delightful ways to celebrate family life is to take the **real** parts of your family and begin to build a wonderful world of “what might be if.”

How: Without really expecting or even wanting to **experience** it, each member of your family has probably wondered something like: “What would our family be like if ... we were very wealthy ... we lived in California ... we had four boys and no girls ... dad were a professional football player,” etc.

Suggest a time for “family fantasy,” with the ground rule that “it’s only a game!” This exercise can be fun, humorous, and you’ll learn lots of things about one another’s hopes and fears that you probably didn’t know before.

VI. The Family Portrait:

Why: Something that makes your family special, unique and significant to the people who are its members is the family history you share. Beginning with the courtship and marriage of the parents, a family has endless events, incidents, humorous stories, etc. that belong only to that family. A family’s history is a bonding kind of thing; it is one of the ways that family members are “insiders” and all others are “outsiders.” There is great room for “celebrating family life” in the sharing of tales, fond memories, etc.

How: Looking at a photo collection, old home movies and other memorabilia is a good way to get into a “family portrait” discussion. Some of the types of recollections and sharing you can have involve:

- * Remember when ... people share memories they have of **their** earlier years in the family — what was happening and how they felt;
- * Remember how we ... share memories of a time of struggle or crisis in your family and the positive ways you coped with it; this might include a change you made that was for the better;
- * Remember the one about ... share favorite family humor; retelling favorite stories, jokes, anecdotes, etc. brings back memories of joyful times and gaiety; family humor is a good unifier;
- * Remember “it” ... share memories of some object or item that you all recollect vividly; the toaster that only Billy could get to work, the ugly grey carpet in your first house, etc.

- * Remember where ... share memories of a place you went to as a family: a special vacation, a unique restaurant, some place you used to visit often, etc.

VII. **There's No Place Like Home:**

Why: The family is a social system that interacts with other social units (school, community, church, etc.). It's important for members to be comfortable leaving and returning to family boundaries. Another part of celebrating family life is to recognize that home "is a good place to come back to." It is safe, comforting, secure. It's where we get unconditional love, become refueled and can be ourselves. This is an activity for taking time to realize what home offers that no other place does.

How: Family members write down or mention as many things as they can think of that are examples of the home being a good place to return to. What are some ways you can be, feel, act, interact, etc. in your home with your family that you feel uncomfortable with any place else? This activity will be especially enjoyable if approached with an open mind and humor.

VIII. **Sharing the Highs:**

Why: It is normal and inevitable to have "lows" and lots of "middles" along with the "highs" of day-to-day family life. This exercise concentrates on celebrating the "highs" in an effort to make them happen more often and to appreciate them more when they do.

How: Each person can talk about the times s/he enjoys living in your family the most. It may be a specific time, like "our family camping trip," or a type of time, like " whenever Dad takes a day off to do stuff with us kids." Then everyone has a chance to share and talk about the differences and similarities of the "highs" people claim. What are some ways your family can work to have even more "highs"?

IX. **Your Family in a Crystal Ball:**

Why: In ten, five, even one year from now, your family will be different in some ways, the same in others. Sometimes a family gains a new perspective on themselves when they project life in the future. Making predictions about your family in the future is a fun way to discover dreams and expectations.

How: Decide on a "future time" and discuss the possibilities of what your family will be like then. What changes will determine things like success, love, togetherness, etc. Remember to keep positive. If everyone agrees, write your ideas down in time capsule fashion, tuck them away and forget about it until some future "celebration of family life."

AFTER THE CELEBRATION — THEN WHAT?

The emphasis on the positive, to-be-celebrated aspects of your family life is not meant to end, in order to begin making important changes and improvements. Hopefully, celebrating will continue to be a planned part of your family working, playing and just being together. It is the strength you gain from being valued and affirmed that should help you build a family life that's even more enriching and rewarding. There are many skills and tools your family can work on to help you become the **best** family you can be. Communication, goal setting, decision-making, problem-solving are all important components of family life. They are skills that are not naturally there, but they can all be learned.

In conclusion of this campaign to have you "celebrate family life," take a few minutes to think about how hard you're willing to work at making your family life a wonderful experience. Wouldn't it be great if our society would be willing to put at least as much effort into the family as is put into some other parts of living? Urie Bronfenbrenner, a famous child development expert once said, "If we'd pay as much attention to families as we pay to firearms and football, this country would be a lot healthier and happier." Perhaps he's right!



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